

# *Artavan Arshakuni*

by Nicholas Adontz

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[198]

The year was 545, the nineteenth year of Justinian's autocracy.

Artavan, the Armenian prince, was returning to the capital from distant Libya. As the hero of the day, a triumphant general, he was coming to receive the hand of the fair Prejecta, daughter of the emperor's sister, as a reward for his valiant deeds. He was prepared, should matters take a different turn, even to revolt against the mighty emperor himself.

Artavan/Artabanes was one of the last shoots of the Arshakuni/Arsacid clan. As this Armenian royal house was dying, and its ancient flame was about to burn out, it cast its last glow over the distant horizons of the Empire. This was a mysterious phenomenon: one might think that Artavan's life was, in miniature, a symbolic foreshadowing of that mission which the Armenians in Byzantine dominions would undertake in the coming centuries.

The Arsacid prince had recently quit his homeland, leaving a good reputation there, a memorial of his great deeds. He had fought against Imperial rule for years, defending the interests of his patrimony. Now, in the capriciously changed situation, he was serving that same power on the battlefields.

The first decade of Justianian's reign was a period of disturbances in Armenia. The Byzantine power was pursuing a policy of encroaching on the country's traditional and distinctive structures. It wanted to introduce its own administration for governing, with the aim of firmly cementing Armenian lands to the Byzantine state.

Byzantine Armenia was separated from Persia along a line which ran from Karin/Theodosiopolis to Nprkert/Martyropolis (Mufarghin). It was divided into two portions from the juridical standpoint. The northern part, which was called Greater or Inner Armenia, with its center at Karin, was located under the rule of an imperial governor. The southern part, comprising five independent and autonomous principalities—similar to the melikdoms of Karabagh's Xamsa (which means "five" in Arabic). These were: Handzit'/Anzitene, the area of present-day Kharberd, Balahovit, now Balu, Hashteank', modern Chapaghjur and Genj, Angeghtun, the area of Ardana, and Tsop'k'/Sophene, which was a large territory [199] on the left and right banks of

the Tigris, including the old and currently standing villages extending from Np'rkert to Bnabegh and P'itar.

Lesser Armenia had long since entered the administrative structure of the Byzantine state and was divided in two: First and Second Armenia, having as centers the cities of Sebastia and Melitene.

An Imperial edict was issued in the year 536, according to which the aforementioned territories were subjected to a new partition, this time being divided into four large districts, called Armenia 1, 2, 3, and 4. The old Inner Armenia hereafter was to be called First Armenia, embracing also the city of Trabizon with its coastal lands. The former Second Armenia, that is, the Sebastia district, would be called Second Armenia, the former Third Armenia, Melitene, remained Third Armenia while, finally, the five autonomous principalities were united under the name of Fourth Armenia. Simultaneously, the local prerogatives were eliminated, giving way to the generalized Byzantine administrative structures.

First of all, these reforms were a blow directed against the *naxarars*' prerogatives, and they aimed to alter the country's ancient social structure.

The administrative reforms already had been preceded by military reforms. A few years earlier, the Armenian lands had been organized into a large military district under the command of a single commander-in-chief. The *naxarars*' cavalry, that is, the mounted brigades, had been incorporated into the military units of the state. The advanced military stations were on the borders—Karin, Kitharich/Citharizon, and Np'rkert, with permanent fortress guards and mostly were under the control of Armenian princes.

These radical changes naturally would have provoked the country, especially the nobility, whose rights they abrogated. All that was required for the restrained discontent to explode was an opportune occasion. The country's officials were to provide that occasion.

The Byzantine-Persian wars ended with treaties of peace in the year 532. In the course of the war, the lord of the gold mine located in the district of Sper, a certain Armenian prince named Symeon, had passed to the emperor's side. The emperor did not demand from Symeon that part of the gold mine which he previously had given to the Persian king. Symeon, availing himself of imperial patronage, forcibly acquired a few villages which had belonged to Prince Peroz, probably an Arsacid descendant. [Peroz'] two sons killed Symeon and fled to Persian Armenia. The emperor granted the disputed villages to Symeon's relative, Hamazasp/Amasaspes, at the same time designating him the country's governor.

An Armenian palace official, named Acacius, made accusations [200] before the emperor that Hamazasp was not loyal and that he again wanted to pass to the Persian side. With the emperor's consent, the slanderer succeeded in killing Hamazasp and taking the reigns of power in his own hands.

Acacius was a malevolent person. Despite being Armenian, he had an inimical attitude toward his own people. As a governor, he was hated by all. He placed new, rather heavy, taxes on the country. Rage was universal. The Armenians organized a conspiracy and put an end to Acacius' life.

The author of the conspiracy and Acacius' killer was Artavan Arshakuni and his brother Hovhannes/John, who were the sons of Hovhannes Arshakuni.

These disturbances produced a result. Sittas or Tzittas, the noted military man, arrived from the capital. He was a person familiar with the country's conditions and operators. He was chief of the newly-formed military district and, during the time of the Persian wars, he was commander of the troops. Sittas employed mild measures to reestablish the peace which had been disturbed, anticipating the desire of the Armenians and removing Acacius' onerous taxes, first of all.

Now Acacius' son, Adolius, who was an official at court, nursed a grudge for his father's murder. He managed to arouse grumbling against Sittas who, supposedly, was slow and careless about punishing the malefactors. Imperial anger toward the the military commander was stoked by more resolute measures. Sittas entered into negotiations with the Aspetian House, that is the Bagratid House, which the Greek historian [Procopius] describes as "the most influential and greatest clan." Peace was about to be sealed when Sittas' troops unexpectedly fell upon the Armenian army which was located near the city of Avnik in Basen, observing the conclusion of the negotiations. Sittas sullied his reputation, killing Armenian women and children who had taken refuge in a cave. The Armenians, enraged by this treacherous, inimical, and ill-conceived act, pounced upon him. Artavan Arshakun yet again displayed his valor, killing Sittas with a deftly-aimed lance.

Thus fell the emperor's greatest general, a man who was regarded in the government as being of equal importance to Belisarius. Another general arrived in his place, Bouz(es) or, in the new pronunciation, Vuz. He too was a partisan of peaceful methods, or, at least, pretended to be. Previously, Bouzes had been a close acquaintance and personal friend of Artavan's father, Prince Hovhannes Arshakuni. Sittas called Hovhannes to visit him, hoping through him to put an end to the disturbances. Hovhannes went to his old friend, taking along Vasak Mamikonian, who has his son-in-law. The Mamikonian [201] prince sensed, with his clan's special instincts, that the trip was not a good one, and gave his father-in-law advice to turn back. Hovhannes did not listen and continued his solitary route, and was sacrificed to the confidence that he held for his friend. The Byzantine general betrayed him and, like a coward, had Prince Hovhannes killed.

The enmity increased. The rebels were powerless to prolong the resistance. Either they would have to put down their arms, or else apply for outside help. Sometimes, very successfully, the Armenian *naxarars* had profitted from the antipathy between the two big powers. They planned to disturb the relations between the Persian king and Justinian, and to incite Xosrov against him.

Vasak Mamikonian was at the head of the delegation. Artavan, who was the spirit of the rebellion, also was a participant. After committing two crimes against the Empire, it would have been foolish on his part to take on the role of critic. Indeed, it was Vasak, his son-in-law, who was speaking in Xosrov's presence. The Byzantine historian [Procopius] places the following speech in Vasak's mouth:

"Many of us, O Master, are Arsacidae, descendants of that Arsaces who was not unrelated to the Parthian kings when the Persian realm lay under the hand of the Parthians, and who proved himself an illustrious king, inferior to none of his time. Now we have come to thee, and all of us have become slaves and fugitives, not, however, of our own will, but under most hard constraint, as it might seem by reason

of the Roman power, but in truth, O King, by reason of thy decision—if, indeed, he who give the strength to those who wish to do injustice should himself justly bear also the blame of their misdeeds. Now we shall begin our account from a little distance back in order that you may be able to follow the whole course of events. Arsaces, the last king of our ancestors, abdicated his throne willingly in favour of Theodosius, the Roman emperor, on condition that all who should belong to his family through all time should live unhampered in every respect, and in particular should in no case be subject to taxation. And we have preserved the agreement, until you, the Persians, made this much-vaunted treaty, which, as we think, one would not err in calling a sort of common destruction. For from that time, disregarding friend and foe, he who is in name thy friend, O King, but in fact thy enemy, has turned everything in the world upside down and wrought complete confusion. And this thou thyself shalt know at no distant time, as soon as he is able to subdue completely the people of the West. For what thing which was before forbidden has he not done?" [Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II. iii. 32-38; Loeb, pp. 279-281]

The speech concerns Emperor Justinian. The Armenian protestors then enumerated, one by one, how the emperor had eliminated the freedom of the neighboring Tzans and Lazi; and had extended a hand to the Huns on one side and [202] to the Ethiopians on the other. He had brought disaster in Libya, and in Italy, where he crushed the Vandals, Goths, and Moors. Finally, he had tried to tempt the Arab tribal leader Alamundaras, who was a Persian subject. After overturning all these peoples, it only remained for Justinian to conquer the Persian state. Vasak wanted to demonstrate that the emperor was unfaithful to the treaty sealed in 532: "Justinian himself has terminated the treaty," continued the Armenian speaker, "For they break the peace, not who may be first in arms, but they who may be caught plotting against their neighbors in time of peace. For the crime has been committed by him who attempts it, even though success be lacking. Now as for the course which the war will follow, this is surely clear to everyone. For it is not those who furnish causes for war, but those who defend themselves against those who furnish them, who are accustomed always to conquer their enemies."

The Armenians emphasized that Justinian's situation was not favorable. The great bulk of the troops were dispersed in distant parts of the West. Of two notable military commanders, one, Sittas, had been slain by the Armenians themselves, while the other, Belisarius, would never again be seen by Justinian. Vasak concluded his speech as follows: "So that when thou goest against the enemy, no one at all will confront thee, and thou wilt have us leading the army with good will, as is natural, and with a thorough knowledge of the country." [Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II. iii. 50-57; Loeb, p. 285]

The Armenians' proposal was acceptable to the Persian monarch and was especially agreeable to the Persian military.

Another delegation went before Xosrov with the same mission, this one from the king of the Goths. He also was pained by Justinian's policy of global conquest, and encouraged the Persian king to make war.

A bit later the Lazi appealed to Xosrov, adding weight to the previous requesters. Their speeches were made in the same style as those of the Armenians. Of course, these speeches are literary

creations and belong to the historian rather than to the speakers. Despite this circumstance, their historical value is not reduced. This was a technique acceptably employed in ancient historiography and by which our historian also has revealed the position of Justinian's enemies toward his policies. Small nations which had been swallowed were well acquainted with the voracious appetite of the large state, and were not at all unacquainted with what was transpiring in the many corners of the state.

The Persian court wanted to profit from the inner turmoil and discontents of the Empire, and so declared war. With just a few strikes it hoped to rule over Byzantine territories up to the Euphrates.

[203]

The Armenians had presented themselves [at the Persian court] in autumn of the year 539. They went into preparation during the winter, and military activities commenced the following spring. During the first three years, the military venues were Mesopotamia and Lazika, that is, areas to Armenia's south and north. Only in the year 543 did the opposing armies fight on Armenia's soil. The imperial troops moved toward Dvin in three fronts from the aforementioned bases. The clash occurred near the village of Angegh where the Persians were badly defeated.

Rebel Armenians, under the leadership of Vasak and Artavan had participated in the Persian movements. However, before the Persian troops passed into Armenia, the rebels abandoned the Persians and, reconciling with the Emperor, pulled back from the capital and entered [Byzantine] state service. New and broad horizons opened before Artavan.

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Artavan was not alone. With him were his brother Hovhannes and a brigade of Armenian braves.

The Byzantine conquest of Africa and its pacification had not yet ended. Around the year 545, the emperor sent to Libya the senator Areobindus, who was the husband of his sister's daughter Prejecta. Among others in his army were the brothers Artavan and Hovhannes Arshakuni with their fighters. Reaching Carthage, Areobindus learned that the chiefs of the Moors, Stotzas and Antal(as) were encamped with their troops at a distance of three days' march. A clash was unavoidable. The imperial troops in neighboring Numidia had not arrived to help, contrary to Areobindus' order. A bloody battle took place. The Byzantine brigade was not large and its general was Hovhannes Arshakuni, who fought heroically and fell on the field of battle. His loss caused great sorrow to the emperor.

It was soon made plain that the troops in Numidia, deliberately, had not come to their aid. Their chief, Gontharis, was an arrogant and malicious person who had hatched an evil plan to seize the rule of Africa and to declare himself king. First he had to destroy Areobindus, and so he had entered into secret relations with the Moors and encouraged them to invade Carthage against Areobindus. Gontharis promised Antalas, the Moor chief, that if the attempt were crowned with success, he would cede to him the Carthaginian state of Byzacium.

[204]

Another chief of the Moors, Coutzinas, who was king in Numidia, was with Antalas and also was a participant in the campaign. Areobindus was able to lure him to his side and reach an agreement by which, during the fighting, he would betray his comrade and pass over to the Byzantine army.

Areobindus, who was uninformed about Gontharis' plots, revealed to him the secret deal between himself and Couthinas. Gontharis hurried to warn Antalas.

Thus the two Moorish princes invaded Carthage against Areobindus, one of them prepared to betray his friend and pass to Areobindus' side, while the other—who was a partisan for Gontharis—was ready to betray his general, Areobindus.

Gontharis, wanting to remove Areobindus during the course of the battle, convinced him to go to the head of the force and personally to arrange the brigades against the Moors.

Areobindus, who was completely untried in military matters—he had never held a weapon or shield—hesitated about fighting and exposing his person to danger imprudently. This delay gave Gontharis to believe that Areobindus had become aware of matters and that his plot had been exposed. Gontharis hastened to remove the mask and entered Carthage, inciting the troops against Areobindus, accusing him of being a cowardly person trying to evade doing battle with the enemy, and someone who was preparing to flee, taking along the treasury which had been allocated for the troops. Gontharis proposed that the indignant military men should arrest Areobindus and seize control funds.

The troops proclaimed Gontharis commander-in-chief in place of Areobindus. Meanwhile, in light of this development, Areobindus wanted to flee to the capital. It was at this juncture that Artavan pushed himself forward and advised him to go against the rebel Gontharis, and to suppress the internal disturbances. Prince Artavan immediately gathered the Armenian braves and, taking a few other soldiers who had remained loyal, attacked Gontharis. Artavan wrought miraculous feats of bravery, destroying many enemies. But Areobindus, who had never seen blood, was horrified at the terrible slaughter, escaped, and hid himself in a church by the shore, where his wife and child were located. The brigade followed Areobindus. Artavan was unable to get in front of the flight, and remained alone, and then he himself was forced to leave the field of battle.

Gontharis took over Areobindus' house and treasures. He sent the city's bishop as an intermediary to Areobindus, for him to come and present himself [205], promising him safety. In accordance with the custom of the time, the despot swore an oath on the baptismal font that no evil would be done to Areobindus. The latter believed this and went and threw himself at the victor's feet. Gontharis ordered that he should be freed and sent to the capital with his wife, and also that his treasures which had been seized should be returned to him. After this, Gontharis called him to dinner and proposed that his final night should be passed in his former dwelling and that in the morning he would be put on his way to the capital. However, this was just a trap. Gontharis broke his promise and had his naive guest murdered during the night.

The wife and sister of the murdered man had fallen into Gontharis' hand. He kept them honorably and forced the wife, Prejecta, to write to the emperor that Gontharis was entirely blameless in the loss of her husband, Areobindus, and was himself a victim of circumstances. In this manner,

Gontharis hoped to satisfy the emperor and receive his consent to marry Prejecta, with her rich dowry.

Artavan, along with Areobindus, had submitted to Gontharis. The murder of the general and the captivity of his family were events which could not but affect the sensitive Armenian prince. Artavan considered it a sacred duty to punish the evil doer for his double crime of tyranny and murder. He planned to kill Gontharis.

Artavan's intimates were his relative Grigor (who, it seems, was his sister's son, Vasak Mamikonian's son) and his comrade-in-arms, Artashir/Artasires, probably also of the Arsacid clan. Artavan revealed his secret to these two people.

The Mamikonian descendant, who was instantly inflamed with his clan's special love of adventure, began further to arouse his uncle, to encourage in him a thirst for glory.

Here is how Grigor put it:

"Artabanes, the opportunity is now at hand for you, and you alone, to win the glory of Belisarius—nay more, even to surpass that glory by far. For he came here, having received from the emperor a most formidable army and great sums of money, having officers accompanying him and advisers in great numbers, and a fleet of ships whose like we have never before heard tell of, and numerous cavalry, and arms, and everything else, to put it in a word, prepared for him in a manner worthy of the Roman empire. And thus equipped he won back Libya for the Romans with much toil.

But all these achievements have so completely come to naught, that they are, at this moment, as if they had never been—except indeed, that there is at present left to the Romans from the victory of Belisarius the losses they have suffered in lives and in money [206] , and, in addition, that they are no longer able even to guard the good things they won. But the winning back of all these things for the emperor now depends upon the courage and judgment and right hand of you alone. Therefore consider that you are of the house of the Arsacidae by ancient descent, and remember that it is seemly for men of noble birth to play the part of brave men always and in all places. Now many remarkable deeds have been performed by you in behalf of freedom. For when you were still young, you slew Acacius, the ruler of the Armenians, and Sittas, the general of the Romans, and as a result of this becoming known to the king Chosroes, you campaigned with him against the Romans.

And since you have reached so great a station that it devolves upon you not to allow the Roman power to lie subject to a drunken dog, show at this time that it was by reason of noble birth and a valorous heart that at the former time, good sir, you performed those deeds; and I as well as Artasires here will assist you in everything, so far as we have the power, in accordance with your commands." [Procopius, History of the Wars, IV. xxvii, 8-22, Loeb, pp. 439, 441]

This speech, though a creation of the historian, in every way correctly characterizes the tense situation of the Armenians in Gontharis' army. Gontharis was upset by the involvement of his co-

conspirator with the Moorish prince, Antalas. In violation of the agreement, he did not receive a portion of the property and troops of the enemy conquered by Antalas. Gontharis satisfied himself only with sending to Antalas as a gift Areobindus' head. The enraged Moorish prince abandoned his erstwhile comrade and joined the remnants of the imperial troops in Byzacium.

Gontharis ordered Artavan to go against Antalas and to defeat his troops. And indeed, Artavan conquered Antalas and put his troops to flight. However, instead of pursuing them, Artavan ordered his own forces to turn back. This matter seemed suspicious to one of Gontharis' comrades named Ulitheus. He wanted to accuse Artavan of treason. Prince Artavan, in a required explanation, dispelled every doubt and simultaneously advised Gontharis to take an even larger army against the dangerous enemy and to permanently crush his forces.

Gontharis decided to follow Artavan's proposal. On the eve of the campaign, he organized a great feast and invited all his troops to it, including Artavan and those close to him.

The table was set up in the grand hall where, from ancient times, three special couches were located. On the first couch Gontharis himself reclined with his partisans, Artavan and a Thracian named Peter, who was lance-bearer to Solomon, Libya's [207] former governor. The other two couches were occupied by leaders of the Vandal brigades. Here was an ideal opportunity to kill the tyrant. This thought excited Artavan, who had long since planned the assassination. Artavan revealed this intention of his to Gregory and Artashir and the other armed Armenians. He ordered that during the meal they should stand behind him, swords in hand, as was the accepted custom.

The plan of the conspiracy had been developed appropriately. The first attacker would be Artashir. Grigor had an order to select the most daring Armenian youths, take them to the court and leave them in an anteroom, at the side of Gontharis' protectors. There was no need to inform them of the nature of this operation. They were told that there was suspicion that perhaps Artavan had been invited to the meal with the intention of plotting his murder. Thus, as a precaution, it was necessary that they should wait at the side of Gontharis' guards. Moreover, they were to take the guards' shields in their hands and play with them, as if joking, raising them high and low and waving them about, and that if they heard cries arising in the confusion inside, they were to take the shields and run to help.

The actual execution of the murder was entrusted to Artashir who, along with Grigor, was standing by the table behind Artavan as a bodyguard. In this situation, bodyguards did not have the right to carry shields. Thus Artashir came up with another means of protection. Breaking the shafts of arrows, he arranged them on his left arm, binding them on with leather and further concealing them with the sleeve of his tunic. During fighting, that arm would serve as a shield against the blows of adversaries.

After these preparations, Artashir turned to Artavan with the following words:

"I shall touch the body of Gontharis with this sword; but as for what will follow, I am unable to say whether God in His anger against the tyrant will co-operate with me in this daring deed, or whether, avenging some sin of mine, He will stand against me there and be an obstacle in my way. If, therefore, you see that the tyrant is not wounded in a vital spot, do you kill me with my sword without the least hesitation, so that I may not be tortured by him into saying that it was by your will that I rushed

into the undertaking, and thus not only perish myself most shamefully, but also be compelled against my will to destroy you as well."

Artashir, Grigor, and another comrade entered the hall and stood behind Artavan. The banquet began. The worried Artashir awaited an appropriate moment. Indeed, his hand already had reached for the sword when Grigor did not permit it and said to him in Armenian that Gontharis was still sentient and had not yet drunk enough wine.

Artashir sighed and said: "Listen, you did not do well to interrupt that moment when I had the heart to strike the blow."

[208]

The banquet continued and Gontharis now had become gladdened from the wine, and generously was giving out portions from his table to the soldiery. Whoever received such departed the hall to eat outside the hall. All had withdrawn except for three people [beside Gontharis], one of whom was the aforementioned Ulitheus.

Artashir also was going out with his comrades. Suddenly the thought struck him that if he were then to remove his sword from its sheath, no one could stop him. At once he drew the sword from its sheath, threw the sheath to one side, concealed the sword under his tunic, and reentered the chamber. He approached Gontharis, as though he wanted to tell him something in secret.

Artavan saw this and became excited. An internal struggle disturbed his inner calm as he became dizzy and paled and at the same time was inspired by the magnitude of the issue at stake.

Peter the Thracian grasped what was going on but said nothing, since deep down he was well disposed to the deed.

When Artashir had approached Gontharis, one of the attendants pushed him and as he so moved, the attendant's eye fell upon the naked sword. He shouted: "What is that, my friend?" Gontharis had put his hand on his right ear and turned toward Artashir. Just at that moment, the sword descended on his head and sliced off half of his scalp along with the fingers.

Petros cried out in a loud voice, exhorting Artashir to destroy the great evil doer.

Gontharis sprang up from his seat. Artavan, who was sitting not far from him, unsheathed a double-edged sword and thrust it into Gontharis' left side up to the hilt, and left it there. In vain Gontharis tried to get up. However, the blow had been fatal and he fell where he was.

Ulitheus brought down his sword to strike Artashir. But the latter thrust out his arm, which was covered with armor made from the arrow shafts. He threw back the blow and, without difficulty, attacked and killed Ulitheus.

Artavan and Petros took the swords of Gontharis and Ulitheus and started to kill the remaining guards. As was natural, a great tumult arose. Those Armenians who were standing outside by the side of Gontharis' men, as soon as they heard the noise, rushed inside as they had been ordered, and, without serious opposition, killed the Vandal princes who had been Gontharis' partisans.

Gontharis' guards, were thus forced by events to align themselves with the victorious Armenians.

Thus did the rebel Gontharis meet with a gruesome end. He had reigned for only 37 days. It was the 18th year of Justinian's reign, that is, the year 545.

[209]

By this act, Artavan achieved great renown throughout the entire Empire. Areobindus' wife, Prejecta, gifted him a large treasure, while the emperor designated him as the overall military commander for Libya.

Not long after, Artavan asked the emperor's permission to return to the capital. The emperor granted the request and designated in his place in Libya another individual, named John, brother of Pap. There is a belief that he also was Armenian. However, this question is outside our present purview.

In the capital, a new stage in Artavan's life began.

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Artavan, a son of the Arsacid exile, was handsome and well-formed, of noble behavior, stately gestures, and moderate speech. Following the Libyan adventure, he became a revered popular hero. The luxurious capital bowed before him.

Areobindus' widow, Prejecta, especially, was not indifferent to the valiant Artavan. She had been saved from Gontharis' unpleasant embrace by this Armenian brave. Meanwhile, Artavan, for his part, was in love with her. Already in Libya the two had given each other their word. When Prejecta returned to the capital from her captivity, Artavan followed after her a short while later. He had left in Libya that high office which was a rightful reward for his great deeds. Artavan already was considered Prejecta's affianced, and he longed to marry her.

From all indications, it appears that Artavan's passion was the true motivation for the conspiracy to kill Gontharis. It was his love for Prejecta which pushed him to commit the crime. The contemporary historian [Procopius] provides no rational basis for Artavan's deed. What the actual cause was for the murder remains dim. It must be stated that the historian Procopius relates the Libyan adventure in a somewhat sarcastic fashion. The sarcasm sometimes turns to ridicule. He himself was secretary to the prominent general Belisarius, and has great reverence toward his master. He displays envy toward everyone who might reduce Belisarius' renown by any other marvellous deeds. This is the reason that the historian's irony always has the same backdrop, whether toward Artavan or Artashir, that their impulse in the conspiracy was solely to astound the world, to be like Belisarius. In this situation the historian shows himself to be, without a doubt, more psychologist than unbiased observer. He is not disposed to give any weight to the romantic intimacy between Artavan and Prejecta; rather, on the contrary, he labors to discredit their love. Supposedly Artavan was attracted to Prejecta with the hope that through her it would be easy to aspire to the imperial [210] throne. Let us recall that Prejecta was the daughter of Justinian's sister, and thus belonged to the Imperial house. It is said about Prejecta that it was not real love but rather a feeling of gratitude which she had toward Artavan, her liberator. It was he who avenged Prejecta's husband, and he who freed her from Gontharis' clutches. That the passion of

love could have inspired Artavan's actions toward the Libyan court, may be seen from the fact that the same passion motivated him to an incomparably greater and more audacious deed. That was a conspiracy against Justinian—in his own capital.

The historian [Procopius] begins the narration of Artavan's bold plan with some moralizing philosophy. When a man unexpectedly rises on the wings of fate, he is incapable of stopping and being satisfied with the joy of what he already has achieved. Rather, he looks farther ahead until he comes to lose all that he had achieved. Artavan had reached the pinnacle of glory. The Emperor had decorated him with very grand honors. After leaving the directorship of the Libyan military, he was designated head of the capital's forces. The Emperor honored him with the office of consul. Fate was smiling on him from all sides. It remained only for him to enjoy Prejecta's love, but in that he failed.

Artavan had married at a young age. His wife was Armenian and even from the Arsacid clan. Artavan had left her in her homeland. The woman resignedly had put up with the difficulty of separation. But when she heard that Artavan had become renowned throughout the entire Empire thanks to his bravery and to the successful outcome of affairs, she no longer could endure her inglorious situation and took the road to Byzantium. She presented herself to the empress and requested that her husband be returned to her. The empress, who protected unfortunate and abandoned women in every way, forced Artavan to reconcile with his wife and to take her back.

Meanwhile, Prejecta had passed to the hand of another suitor. The loss of the woman he loved left a bitter sorrow in Artavan's heart. The Armenian prince was deeply wounded. Angrily he often made his unhappiness known, that in return for the services he had rendered to the Empire, they did not even let him have his beloved woman and forced him to live with someone he hated and was as if an enemy to him.

Artavan was tormented internally, and was unable to alleviate his pain. The proud prince had been wounded, stung. He hated the author of this deprivation. He hardly could restrain his enflamed passion, which threatened to explode.

There was another individual who, similarly, was discontent and was full of unrestrained hatred toward the emperor. That was Prince Arshak, who also was Armenian and even a relation of Artavan's, that is, he was from the Arsacid clan.

[211]

Arshak, too, had left his homeland recently and, it seems, around the same time and under the same circumstances as Artavan. They said that Arshak had been denounced before Justinian. Supposedly, he had united with the Persian monarch, Xosrov, and was trying to induce a revolution in the Empire. Probably the reference related to any of the plots set against the emperor. In any case, the emperor forgave Arshak, not ravishing his belongings or throwing him into jail. Nonetheless, he did inflict a deep insult on him. He ordered that he be beaten with a whip and then, placed on a camel, driven around the city.

Arshak was deeply disturbed by the emperor's behavior and was looking for a way to act against him and the state. It is natural that he found sympathy first and foremost from his countryman, Artavan.

Thereafter Arshak began to incite Artavan, stoking his ego and trying to get him to act against Justinian. He reproached Artavan even for the glory and renown that he had achieved:

"And when he saw that Artabanes, as his kinsman, was sharing his vexation, he began to stir him up still more, and, gaining the man's attention by crafty speeches, he ceased not day nor night to upbraid him, rebuking him for having been both courageous and faint-hearted out of season. For he had, on the one hand, given proof of his nobility of spirit in his attitude toward the misfortunes of others, in that he had put an end to the tyranny; indeed, though Gontharis was his friend and his host, he had laid hold of him with his own hand and slain him under no compulsion whatever. But at the present juncture, he said, he was utterly cowed, and he continued to sit there without a spark of manhood **though his fatherland was kept under strictest guard and exhausted by unwonted taxes**, his father had been slain on the pretext of a treaty and covenant and his whole family had been enslaved and was kept scattered to every corner of the Roman empire. But in spite of these facts Artabanes thought it sufficient for him to be a general of the Romans and merely bear the name of consul. 'And you,' he said 'do not share my sorrow in the least, though I am your kinsman and have suffered outrageous treatment, while I, for my part, pity you, my dear fellow for the fortune you have suffered in the case of both those women, not only the one you have been cheated of wrongfully but also the other with whom you have been compelled to live. And yet it ill becomes anyone who has even a little spirit in him to refuse to undertake the murder of Justinian, nor should he hesitate nor entertain any fear,—a man who always sits unguarded in some lobby to a late hour of the night, eagerly unrolling the Christian scriptures in company with priests who are at the extremity of old age.' " [Procopius, VII, xxxii, 7-11, Loeb pp. 421, 423]

With such speeches did Arshak rouse Artavan. When he saw that the great general was starting to yield, he applied to yet another Armenian, a Persian Armenian named Chanaranges, and attempted to include him in the affair as well. [212]. Chanaranges was a young fellow, very good-looking, but not mentally mature, having a rather childish nature. It was not difficult to persuade him.

Arshak, after securing the consent of his two countrymen, also tried to pull to his side the emperor's brother's son, Germanus, who was also an influential individual at court.

Arshak, when talking to Artavan, hinted that Justinian was quite alone—detached from his relatives and thus unable to expect help from them. This allusion really applied to Justinian's relative, Germanus. When Germanus' brother died, he had left his inheritance to Germanus with the provision that his wife and daughter would receive their legitimate portions. Justinian had intervened, pretending to be the protector of the interests of wife and daughter. With that circumstance, Germanus' relations with the emperor became strained and even turned to enmity.

Germanus had two sons, both still youths, hot-blooded and aroused against the emperor. Arshak hoped, as he had assured Artavan, that these two brothers would not only join in the conspiracy, but would take the initiative in the matter. The senior brother, Justinus, was still a lad with his beard hardly sprouting, nonetheless he was known for his energetic and enterprising spirit. He had earned the title of consul.

Arshak applied to him and requested an appointment to hold a secret and important conversation. The meeting took place in a church.

First, Arshak made Justinus swear that the discussion would remain between them and that he would not reveal it to anyone, excepting, perhaps, his father. Thereafter Arshak began to take him to task for being so indifferent to political life. Though the emperor's close relative, he excused the fact that high offices of the state were occupied by insignificant people of low birth. Sitting idly, he was content to play the role of a useless spectator. Clearly the emperor was disparaging him, since not only had he, Justinus, not been placed in an important position, but even his father—who most certainly was a meritorious person and the emperor's younger brother—was fated to spend his entire lifetime as a private individual in a modest role. Continuing his speech, Arshak reminded Justinus how, due to the emperor's stubbornness, he was unable even to receive his uncle's inheritance, which had been left to him in a will, of which a large part had already fallen out of his hand thanks to the unending meddling of the emperor. In Arshak's opinion, the status of Justinus and his folk would get even worse when Belisarius returned from Italy—Belisarius who, according to the news, already was en route and had reached Ilyricum.

After roiling Justinus' mind with such inflammatory remarks, [213] Arshak proposed that he should act against Justinian, and join in the planned conspiracy. He described the nature of the operation and, moreover, did not conceal from him what he had discussed with Artavan and Chanaranges.

When Justinus heard all this, he was confused and shocked and explained very plainly that neither he nor his father were able to accept such a proposal.

Arshak related everything to Artavan, while Justinus took the news to his father. The latter communicated his son's conversation to the commander of the palace guards, a man named Marcellus. Germanus and Marcellus strategized and determined that it was premature and perhaps even dangerous to themselves to provide this information to the emperor.

Marcellus was a serious man of very great dignity who observed silence in most matters. In office, he had a reputation for not doing things for the sake of money, and was uninterested in frivolous talk or actions. In his private life, too, he was quite austere, distant from vices and buffoonery. He was especially zealous with regard to justice and truth. Indeed, it was this man who did not permit the matter to reach the emperor. He said to Germanus:

"For as for you," he said, "it is inexpedient that you should carry information of this thing. For if you should wish to say anything to the emperor in secret, Artabanes and his friends will straightway become suspicious that the matter has been denounced, and, if perchance Arsaces is able to escape unnoticed, the charge will remain unproved. And I, on the other hand, am not at all accustomed either to believe myself or to report to the emperor anything which I have not thoroughly verified. It is my desire, consequently, either that I hear the words with my own ears or that one of my intimates, by your contriving, hear the man saying something unmistakably clear about these matters." [Procopius, *History of the Wars*, VII, xxxii, 23-31?, Loeb p. 429]

Germanus ordered his son, Justinus, to implement Marcellus' wish. However, Justinus could not further aspire to converse with Arshak, since he had totally rejected his proposal. Justinus thought to apply to Chanaranges and ask him if it was with Artavan's knowledge that Arshak had approached him.

"For I," he said, "should never have had the courage to entrust any of my secrets to him, seeing he is such a man as he is. But if you should be willing yourself to tell me something to the point, we could, by deliberating in common, perhaps accomplish something really worth while." [Loeb, p. 429]

First Chanaranges received Artavan's approval and then repeated to Justinus all that Arshak had told him. Justinus pretended that he approved of the plan and promised to convince his father as well.

The father, Germanus, wanted to negotiate with Chanaranges in person. They designated a day for the interview. Germanus informed Marcellus and requested that he send a trustworthy man to hear Chanaranges with his own ears. [214]. Marcellus entrusted this work to a man named Leontius, who was renowned for his justice and honesty. Germanus concealed him behind a curtain in his home, giving him the ability to follow Chanaranges' conversation. The latter, unaware that it was a trap, related all that Artavan, Arshak, and he himself had been considering. He recalled that they considered it dangerous to begin the work in Belisarius' absence, fearing that when he reached the city, he could go against them and harm them. Meanwhile, if they succeeded in overthrowing Justinian before Belisarius' arrival, again they would not be sure that Belisarius would remain idle. It is probable that he would assemble a large force in Thrace and attack them. Thus the conspirators considered it more favorable to await Belisarius' arrival. At that time, on a designated day, they could suddenly invade the court, entering with their daggers late in the evening when it was dark, and kill at one and the same time the emperor, Marcellus, and Belisarius. In this way all danger would be eluded and the victorious conspirators would become masters of the throne and the state.

The concealed Leontius heard all this and believed it. However, Germanus did not consider it appropriate to inform the emperor immediately. Excessive haste could compromise proving Artavan's guilt. Marcellus was a just man. Germanus, seeing that Marcellus was postponing the work and, fearing that he would come under suspicion too, hastened to reveal the secret to Constantinus and Bouzes.

Germanus' fear was realized. A few days later the news arrived that Belisarius was close to the city. Marcellus, who probably was awaiting his arrival, revealed the nature of the situation to the emperor. Artavan's people were immediately arrested. An inquiry was established. Once the examination ended and the written result was presented to the emperor, the latter held a special tribunal of senators in his palace. The tribunal found Germanus and his son, Justinus, guilty. The historian [Procopius], who in every way tries to whiten the image of these two individuals, is forced to concede that the supreme council had condemned them. However, once Constantinus and Bouzes testified that Germanus had, from the beginning, kept them informed, the court declared the accused men innocent. Thereafter Marcellus arrived, though late, and confessed that it was he himself who was responsible for not announcing the crime at the time. He had delayed, but solely for the sake of learning all the details of the deed more closely. He assured them that

Germanus and Justinus had provided him with information beforehand, without concealing anything.

[215]

In this way Marcellus saved Germanus and Justinus. The weight remained on Artavan. The emperor stripped him of all his offices and honors, but did not create any other unpleasantness either for him or his comrades. Indeed, he did not put Artavan into the usual prison, but kept him under guard in the palace.

In less than a year, the emperor pardoned Artavan.

It appears that the truth has become distorted in the story of the conspiracy. The historian was not a fan of Artavan's and the truth has been sacrificed to other considerations. Indeed, the emperor had designated an investigative committee to study the deed and it assembled a detailed report. Based on this investigation of the supreme tribunal, Germanus and Justinus were deemed guilty. And suddenly witnesses came forth, Bouzes and Marcellus—men who should have been interrogated before all the others, but remained silent and unperturbed, and talked about it only after the sentence had been delivered. This verdict was more than suspicious. Of course, the Greek historian wanted to conceal something, and so he disparaged the judicial proceeding.

Both Germanus and Justinus were despised by the emperor and empress. Germanus' son-in-law, John, had the same sentiments and nursed a grudge against Justinian, who had treacherously slain his father's brother, Vitalianus. Bouzes, too, had no particular grounds to like the empress. Five years prior to the conspiracy, in the year 543, the emperor had become gravely ill, almost to the point of death. Bouzes and Belisarius had incautiously remarked, in jest, that the fate of Justinian's successor depended on themselves. News of this reached the empress. One day she summoned Bouzes to court and suddenly ordered that he be thrown into a dark and closed cellar where those sentenced to death were kept. The wretched Bouzes remained in this pit for two years and four months. When he finally was released, it was as though a corpse had come back to life. It is understandable that this man would have no tender affection and loyalty for the imperial house.

Now, when such suspicious people are mentioned as taking part in the conspiracy, it is difficult to expect that they were innocent victims. Rather, the contrary conclusion is the true one, as the supreme tribal itself demonstrated.

The aforementioned people probably had been participants in the conspiracy. Later, for one reason or another, from fear or other considerations, they rejected it. From one of Arshak's remarks we might conclude that Germanus was hoping that he himself would be the candidate for the throne. Perhaps later on [216] he became convinced that it would be difficult to compete with Artavan, and then that it would be pointless to be his accomplice and subject his own life to danger in vain.

In any case, Artavan's gratitude did not last long. After Belisarius' departure, Italy again fell into the hands of the Goths. From there they invaded Sicily. The imperial navy set out against them, under the leadership of Liberius. However, the emperor soon felt that he had made a mistake. Liberius was still a youth and inexperienced in military tactics. It was at that point that the

emperor pardoned Artavan, returning his former offices and honors and then designated him as the general military commander of Thrace.

Liberius was immediately recalled and Artavan was sent in his place. The fleet already had reached Syracuse when Artavan departed from the capital. This journey might have had a dreadful outcome. The sea was churning and frightful waves might have swallowed the famous general if, miraculously, the fierce waves had not hurled him onto the island of Melite, modern Malta.

Artavan went from there to Sicily, cleared the island of Goths, and reestablished the legitimate power.

The last time Artavan is mentioned is on the occasion of the siege of the city of Kroton in Italy, when the citizens sent a man to Artavan begging him to help them.

Nothing is known about his life after that.

The conspiracy occurred in 548. The next year, 549, Artavan received a pardon, while in 559 he was in Sicily. Thereafter history is silent about him.

The life of Prince Artavan resembles a novel. This, truly, is the case for all those whose lives take them in new directions. The newness itself is often just a type of fortuity or chance. It is normal that such remarkable lives travelling on new roads are intertwined with frequently accidental and chance connections.

However, Artavan's path was not adventitious. It was the base for a future monument which the Armenians were to erect in Byzantine history.

From Justinian's day on, and as a result of his policies, the doors of the empire were opened wide before the Armenians, especially for the ruling class, the nobility. One after the other, representative of the Arshakuni and Kamsarakan houses especially, were drawn to the West.

Artavan and Hovhannes Arshakuni, the three brothers Nerseh, Hrahut, and Isahak Kamsarakan, Gghak, Artavazd, Varaz, another Hovhannes [217], as well as Arshak, Artashir and Chanaranges, belonged to this stream of Armenian nobility which, with their cavalry, formed the jewel of the Byzantine army in Justinian's day. And the renowned Nerseh was the real mainstay of Justinian's rule.

The Armenian name had already emerged from its narrow valleys and gorges and was spreading into the extensive territory of a great state.

The Armenians constituted a river whose waters irrigated not only its own lands and its neighborhood, but also rolled its forceful waves toward the ocean of general world civilization.

Artavan, Nerseh and the princes operating around them, formed the first great waves which struck the walls of the Byzantine court.

These wild flowers of the Armenian mountains occupied an honored place in the grandeur of Byzantium.

Artavan's specific value was that he was the first Armenian to stretch out his hand to take the imperial crown.

This son of the Arsacids wanted, in one leap, to perch on the throne of Constantine the Great. It was a daring, but not a chimerical, leap. This act of boldness was to lay the foundation for the Armenians' great and magnificent ascent in Byzantium.

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